

# SYSTEMSTATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

### Introduction

The Governor's Crime Commission, in conjunction with the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission and the North Carolina Sheriffs' Education and Training Standards Commission, held a joint planning retreat in the early summer of 2000 to identify and address the major emerging issues facing the state's criminal justice system and its public safety personnel.

Based on the planning group's recommended plan of action a research study team was assembled which consisted of staff members from the three criminal justice commissions. The study team held several meetings and decided that the most appropriate course of action would be to conduct several smaller studies with each targeting the unique attributes and distinct features associated with recruiting and retaining sworn police personnel, sworn sheriff's office personnel, detention officers and public safety telecommunications officials. Thus, this SystemStats is one of four in a series which examine the issue of recruitment and retention among North Carolina's public safety agencies.

A three part, 22 item survey was developed by the study team and administered to 130 telecommunication centers which were randomly selected based upon a stratified sampling technique which divided the state's centers into four groups based on the number of full-time telecommunications personnel. One hundred and nineteen surveys were returned producing a response rate of 91.5 percent.

Over one-half (52.9%) of the responding telecommunicators described their agency's recruitment initiatives as being neutral. One in five (20.2%) described their agency's efforts as somewhat passive while 7.6 percent reported passive recruitment efforts. Slightly less than 17 percent (16.8%) noted that their respective agencies followed strategies which they perceived as being aggressive. Only two respondents (1.7%) suggested that a strongly aggressive recruitment effort was being implemented by their telecommunications' offices.

As Table 1 (page 2) depicts the most frequently employed recruitment technique was word of mouth (N=112) with 94 percent of the respondents indicating that this was the preferred method which their respective agencies used to recruit potential telecommunicators. The second most common recruitment technique was newspaper advertising (N=96, 80.7 %), followed by recruiting through the local personnel job listings (N=87, 73.1%) and use of the Internet (N=72, 60.5%). Recruitment through the Police Corps program and through radio and television advertising were less frequently used.



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Table 1 Recruitment Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Word of mouth	112	94.0 %	6.53
Newspaper	96	80.7 %	5.14
Personnel listings	87	73.1 %	4.99
Internet	72	60.5 %	3.79
Community College	54	45.4 %	2.74
Auxiliary/Reserve Force	53	44.5 %	3.11
Job Fairs	49	41.1 %	1.94
Radio/TV	45	37.8 %	1.42
Police Corps	39	32.8 %	.77

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all recruitment techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

The top three most effective techniques were word of mouth ( $X=6.53$ ), newspapers ( $X=5.14$ ) and local personnel listings ( $X=4.99$ ). Job fairs, the Police Corps program and radio/television advertising were perceived to be the least effective techniques suggesting that the most effective techniques are also the most frequently used. In other words, telecommunications agencies use what works the best for finding potential applicants.

Only 23 (19.3%) respondents noted that their respective offices currently have a backlog, or waiting list, of potential applicants. Of those agencies that do maintain waiting lists the number of individuals on these lists ranged from one to 211 with the average size of the telecommunicator backlog being 14.4 applicants.

Respondents were also asked to report the number of applicants that apply for each vacant telecommunicator position. The number of applicants, per position, ranged from one to 111 with the average number of applicants being 10.9 per vacant telecommunicator position.

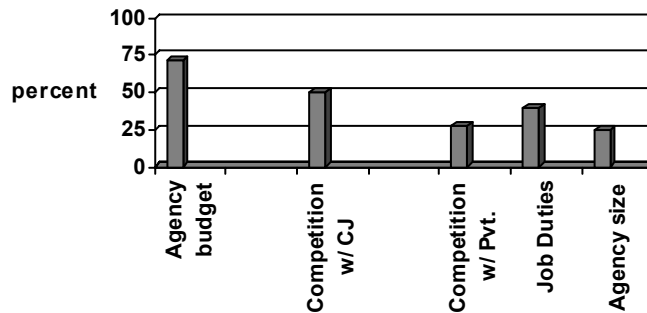
Survey participants were given the opportunity to express ideas about improving future applicant pools; i.e. what policies, standards, programs and other plans could be developed in order to recruit more highly qualified telecommunications professionals. The most frequently suggested method for improving applicant pools was to increase current salaries and adopt standardized, structured and graduated pay scales.

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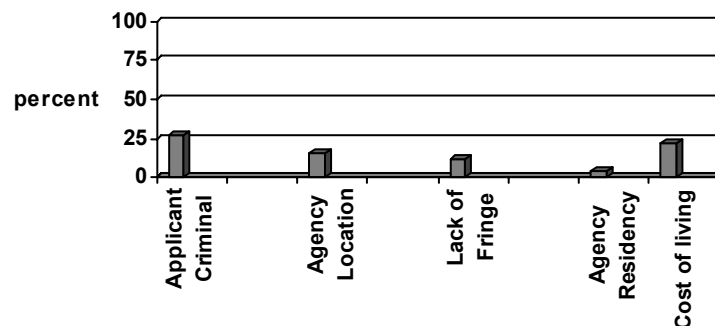
Education and training were also mentioned frequently with numerous respondents suggesting that telecommunications should complete the basic certification course before being considered for employment. Stricter screening of applicants was also suggested with many respondents requesting state standards in the areas of psychological and cognitive testing. The ability to manage and handle stress was also considered extremely relevant and was mentioned, along with computer skills, as another area for pre-employment testing and as screening techniques to better identify qualified applicants.

The research team identified ten possible obstacles, or barriers, to recruiting more qualified applicants with the survey respondents being asked to list all which have negatively impacted upon local recruitment in their respective agencies. The most common barriers were agency budget restrictions (71.4%), competition with other criminal justice agencies (49.6%), specific duties associated with the job (38.7%), and competing with the private sector (27.7%). A lesser number of agency respondents reported that prior criminal histories (26.9%), agency size (24.4%) the current cost of living (22.7%) and agency location (15.3%) were problematic (Refer to Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1** Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates



**Figure 2** Barriers to Effectively Recruiting the Best Possible Candidates



## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

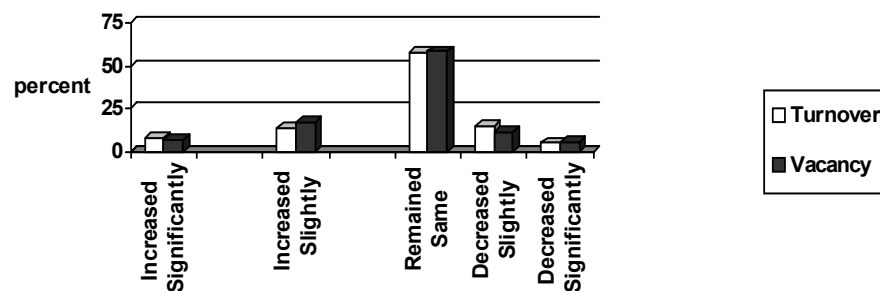
The study team also thought it was important to ascertain the extent to which telecommunication centers hire applicants who have already completed the basic telecommunicator certification course, versus hiring applicants and then sponsoring their training after employment. The percentage of applicants who are hired prior to completing the basic certification course ranged from zero to 100 percent with 70 (58.8 %) agencies hiring all of their applicants first and then sponsoring their training after employment. Across the entire study sample the average telecommunications agency hires 23.8 percent of its applicants from an applicant pool that has already completed a certification program with the remaining 76.2 percent of the new hires being employed prior to completing the certification course.

As Figure 3 reveals turnover rates, using July 2001 as a base, ranged from zero to 67 percent with an average telecommunicator turnover rate for those agencies in the sample of 16.4 percent. The majority of the survey respondents (57.8%) noted that their respective agency

turnover rates have remained stable over the past three years. Slightly more than 20 percent of the agencies experienced an increase in telecommunicator turnover during the last three years while a comparable number of agencies experienced a declining turnover rate during this period.

Vacancy rates, using June 2002 as a base, ranged from zero to 100 percent with the average vacancy rate for telecommunicator positions being 8.2 percent. As with turnover rates the majority of the survey participants noted that their telecommunicator vacancy rates remained stable over the past three years (58.3%). Approximately one out of every four agencies experienced increasing vacancy rates during this period while less than 20 percent experienced decreasing vacancy rates over the course of the last three years.

**Figure 3** Turnover and Vacancy Rates Over the Past Three Years



## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

Respondents were offered a list of six different techniques for personnel retention and were asked to specify each technique used by their agencies and to rank each in terms of their effectiveness on a scale from zero, not effective, to nine, highly effective. The most popular retention strategy was annual pay increases, irrespective of job performance, i.e. longevity and cost of living adjustments (80.7%). Offering educational

incentives, such as tuition reimbursement and allowing officers to attend classes during work hours, was the second most frequently employed technique (68.9%) followed by assigning favorable work shifts (66.4%) and formal award and recognition ceremonies (65.5%).

Table 2 Retention Techniques and their Perceived Effectiveness

Technique	Number Using	% Using	Average Effectiveness Rating (0 to 9)
Annual pay increase irrespective of performance	96	80.7%	4.96
Education/training agency expense	82	68.9%	4.60
Assigned favorable work shift	79	66.4%	4.25
Formal awards, recognition	78	65.5%	3.29
Annual pay increase performance based	73	61.3%	4.71
Promotions	63	52.9%	2.27

Note: Survey respondents were encouraged to select all retention techniques which were utilized by their agencies, thus percentages do not equal 100.

## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

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The top two reasons offered by the respondents as to why their respective agencies lose telecommunicators were poor salaries (58%) and shift work which can lead to stress and job burnout (47.1%). Other reasons included: losing telecommunicators to the private sector, retirement, relocation to follow a spouse, leaving to create a family and medical complications.

Respondents were given a list of possible attrition factors with the leading attrition factor being identified as agency budget restrictions (84%), followed by transfers to other law enforcement agencies (69.7%), the specific duties associated with the job (58%), accepting positions in the private sector (57.1%) and retirement (50.4%).

A more in-depth examination of attrition and lateral transfers revealed that leaving the telecommunications field for work in the private sector was the most common attrition factor within this group with 63 percent of the respondents noting that this occurred within their respective agencies. Accepting employment with a larger law enforcement agency was more prevalent than other types of transfers within the law enforcement community. Of those agencies that lost telecommunicators less than one-third lost these professionals to smaller law enforcement agencies.

Irrespective of why telecommunicators resign, the length of service ranged from less than a month to 240 months with the average telecommunicator terminating employment after serving in this capacity for 30.9 months. Thus, it appears that a critical period of two years and six months exists in which telecommunication centers and agencies can implement policies and/or programs to improve retention rates and conversely minimize their attrition rates by retaining officers beyond this time period.

A series of policy-relevant research questions were examined using the survey data in an effort to further delineate recruitment and retention issues among the state's telecommunicators. Answers to these questions, actual quantitative survey data and the respondents' qualitative suggestions for improving recruitment and retention were compiled and analyzed to produce a series of five policy implications and recommendations.

### Recommendation # 1

A more aggressive and proactive recruitment strategy should be adopted and implemented by those agencies which are losing employees within a relatively short time after their initial hiring date and by those agencies which do not have sizeable applicant pools. As part of this increased outreach an intense public relations campaign should be launched with the goal of educating the public, and many law enforcement officers as well, as to the specific nature of telecommunications and the level of precision that are required for working in this field. Professionalizing the telecommunicator's duties and responsibilities would enhance the quality of applicants and enable members of the public and criminal justice system to realize that this profession requires more than simply talking on the phone and radio.

### Recommendation # 2

Given the low probability of increasing salaries across the state, an alternative for reducing turnover and consequently bolstering retention would be to implement a greater number of in-service training programs oriented specifically to addressing stress and burnout within the telecommunications profession. Stress management courses should be encouraged.

### **Recommendation #3**

Study the feasibility of and need for implementing more basic and in-service training courses and opportunities in the area of telecommunications. This should include developing courses at the local community colleges as well as expanding training currently offered by the North Carolina Justice Academy.

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### **Recommendation #4**

Research the effects of shift work on the telecommunicator position with an emphasis on comparing and contrasting the 8-hour shift with the 12-hour shift. Various personnel scheduling patterns and techniques should be examined with an emphasis on how these can aggravate or mitigate telecommunicator stress and job burnout.

### **Recommendation #5**

Initiate discussions on intensifying or tightening applicant screening with an emphasis on requiring cognitive skills assessment and psychological testing as part of the application process. Perhaps pilot test a telecommunicator assessment/simulation center at the Justice Academy and select community colleges. Continue discussions on the feasibility and costs associated with requiring all telecommunicators to complete basic training prior to employment.

The top two reasons offered by the respondents as to why their respective agencies lose telecommunicators were poor salaries and shift work which can lead to stress and job burnout.

## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

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Prior SystemStats and reports include:

Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Sheriffs' Personnel (SystemStats)

Methamphetamine Fact Sheet (SystemStats)

Evaluating North Carolina's Statewide Automated Victim Assistance and Notification (SAVAN) System

Recruitment and Retention of Detention Facility Personnel (SystemStats)

Technology on Patrol: An Evaluation of Mobile Data Computers in Law Enforcement Vehicles (SystemStats)

Recruitment and Retention of Sworn Police Personnel (SystemStats)

CyberCrime Study

Juvenile Structured Day Programs for Suspended and Expelled Youth: A Statewide Assessment

Effective Strategies for Domestic Violence Shelters: Strengthening Services for Children

Geographic Information Systems for Small and Medium Law Enforcement Jurisdictions (SystemStats)

Dispositional Outcomes of Domestic Violence Ex-Parte and Domestic Violence Protective Orders (SystemStats)

Domestic Violence Shelters and Minorities

Domestic Violence: Dispositional Outcomes of Protective Orders in the Courts

A Process and Impact Evaluation of the North Carolina Communities that Care Initiative

Geographic Information Systems for Small and Medium Law Enforcement Jurisdictions: Strategies and Effective Practices

Perceptions of Crimes Affecting North Carolina's Latino Residents: Results from a Qualitative Crime Prevention Needs Assessment (SystemStats)

National and State School Crime Trends (SystemStats)

Disproportionate Minority Overrepresentation in the Juvenile Justice System

Law Enforcement Tools for Latino Communities

North Carolina Citizens' Perceptions of Crime and Victimization (SystemStats)

Juvenile Day Treatment Centers - Strategies and Effective Practices

Law Enforcement Domestic Violence Units: Handbooks

Some of these reports can also be found on the Governor's Crime Commission website below:

**<http://www.ncgccd.org>**



## Recruitment and Retention of Telecommunications Officers

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Analysis Center's areas of current study:

Recruitment and Retention of Public Safety  
Personnel

Youth Gangs

Methamphetamines in North Carolina

SAVAN Evaluation  
Mobile Data Computers

Grant Sustainability



### SYSTEMSTATS

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The Governor's Crime Commission was established in 1977 by the North Carolina General Assembly under G.S. 143B-479. Its primary duty is "to be the chief advisory body to the Governor and the Secretary of the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety for the development and implementation of criminal justice policy." The Crime Commission is always open to comments and suggestions from the general public as well as criminal justice officials. Please contact us and let us know your thoughts and feelings on the information contained in this publication or on any other criminal justice issue of concern to you.			
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